



January 12, 2007

To Whom It May Concern:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invites the public to comment on a proposal to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on the 2,292 acre Bird Creek Ranch currently owned by Cindy Kittredge. The Bird Creek Ranch is located approximately four miles north of Cascade along the Missouri River in Cascade County. The purpose of the proposed easement is to protect significant conservation values that exist on the ranch, which include farm and ranch lands, native plant communities, wildlife habitats, scenic open space, historic sites and recreational opportunities.

The easement terms are generalized in the enclosed Environmental Assessment. A Socio-Economic Report and Management Plan have also been provided for your review. The comment period will be open through February 16, 2007.

Please send any written comments to the following address:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Attn: Bird Creek Ranch Conservation Easement
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59404

A public hearing on this proposed easement will be held at the Cascade Community Center on Monday, February 5, 2007 at 7:00 p.m.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Spring Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59404

**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN
DRAFT SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT
(January, 2007)**

**A CONSERVATION EASEMENT
FOR THE
BIRD CREEK RANCH
(CASCADE COUNTY)**

PREPARED AND PROPOSED BY:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Wildlife Division
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59404
(406) 454-5864

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DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

I. INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invites the public to comment on a proposal to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on the 2,292 acre Bird Creek Ranch currently owned by Cindy Kittredge. The Bird Creek Ranch is located approximately four miles north of Cascade in Cascade County and is comprised of lands within T18N R01E. The purpose of the proposed project is to protect significant conservation values that exist on the ranch, which include farm and ranch lands, native plant communities, wildlife habitats, scenic open space, historic sites and recreational opportunities. In addition, the proposed conservation easement would guarantee public access for hunting and wildlife viewing. Two USDA conservation easement programs – the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP), along with Pennsylvania Power and Light - Montana (PPL Montana) are partnering with FWP on this project. In 2006, the NRCS WRP program purchased a conservation easement on a 283 acre wetland/slough (Jones slough) within the project area. The FRPP program has allocated approximately \$400,000 towards a NRCS conservation easement on 1,250 acres of prime soils and farmland on the project area, but requires a non-Federal match. PPL Montana will contribute \$50,000 towards the acquisition of the FWP easement utilizing Missouri River mitigation monies. FWP proposes to utilize approximately \$350,000 - \$450,000 from its Habitat Montana Program to fund the remainder of the conservation easement (pending appraisal). Total value of the entire easement is approximately \$900,000 - \$1,000,000 (pending appraisal). The FWP easement will overlie the two NRCS easements in that it will further restrict the landowner's rights in these areas. FWP will be the monitoring agency of the FWP easement document.

The Montana Migratory Bird Stamp Program and has reserved \$50,000 for future riparian and/or wetland enhancement projects on the ranch. These monies will be available pending FWP conservation easement approval. This draft Environmental Assessment further explains how FWP's proposed expenditure for this conservation easement would help facilitate protection of Bird Creek Ranch's critical conservation values. A draft Management Plan and draft Socio-Economic analysis are also included for public review at this time.

II. AUTHORITIES AND DIRECTION

FWP has the authority under law (MCA 87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement or fee title acquisition (MCA 87-1-241 and 242). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana Program. Habitat Montana recognizes that certain native plant communities constituting wildlife habitat are worthy of perpetual conservation. Those communities include intermountain grasslands, sagebrush grasslands and riparian corridors. The Bird Creek Ranch includes such habitats and warrants conservation considerations. A conservation easement was offered to FWP by Cindy Kittredge, owner of Bird Creek Ranch. This offer reflects the Landowner's desire to maintain and protect the family's agricultural and ranching lifestyle, while maintaining and/or enhancing wildlife

habitats. It is proposed that a conservation easement, to be held by FWP, be purchased from the Bird Creek Ranch. This easement would ensure the property remains in private ownership and operation, while preserving important agricultural lands, wildlife habitats, open space and historic sites. The easement would also guarantee reasonable public access for hunting and wildlife viewing on the project area. As with other FWP property interest proposals, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission must approve any easement acquisition proposed by the agency. In addition, the Montana Board of Land Commissioners is also required to review and approve the Department's proposal for this conservation easement acquisition as this action has a value greater than \$100,000 and is larger than 100 acres. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

III. PROJECT LOCATION

The 2,292 Bird Creek Ranch is located approximately 4 miles north of Cascade, along the Missouri River in Cascade County. The Bird Creek Ranch is comprised of 221 acres of palustrine emergent wetlands, 28 acres of palustrine forestland wetlands (mostly cottonwood stands), 60 acres of palustrine shrub wetlands and 1,971 acres of uplands. Three miles of Missouri River frontage constitutes the north and west property boundaries. Four miles of Bird Creek flows through the property to an adjoining 920 acre parcel of DNRC School Trust Lands, which contains the lowest reach and mouth of Bird Creek as it enters the Missouri River. The 420-acre Schrammeck Lake WPA (Waterfowl Production Area), managed by the USFWS, lies five miles southeast of the ranch. The entire property is within FWP's deer/elk Hunting District (HD) 445 and antelope HD 450. A map of the property is included with this document (see Draft Management Plan).

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The primary purpose of this action is to preserve the integrity of the associated native habitats while maintaining agricultural land uses and ownership. The primary habitats represented on Bird Creek Ranch include riparian, emergent wetlands, forested wetlands, and shrub and native grassland communities. By maintaining existing habitat acreage and quality, wildlife use by game species such as white-tailed deer, mule deer, antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and waterfowl, along with numerous species of non-game wildlife will be perpetuated.

Bird Creek Ranch supports approximately 200 white-tailed deer, 50 mule deer and 25-100 antelope at different times of the year. Pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge and waterfowl occupy the property year-round. Riparian areas along the Missouri River and Bird Creek provide critical breeding and wintering habitat for numerous resident and migratory bird species. Other game and non-game species affiliated with native prairies and riparian complexes also inhabit the property year-round. The adjacent Missouri River supports an excellent sport fishery.

A secondary result of this project is guaranteed public hunting and wildlife viewing access. While 40 acres of BLM land and 920 acres of state DNRC land are accessible from Bird Creek

Ranch, the bulk of hunting use will be on Bird Creek Ranch's deeded land. Since HD 445 is approximately 95% private land, guaranteed public hunting and wildlife viewing on the Bird Creek Ranch through this conservation easement will offer opportunities in an area of the Missouri River where public access is somewhat limited.

The need for this project is not established merely by habitats or wildlife use. Rather, the need is linked to threats directed towards native habitats. These threats manifest as residential subdivision, excessive livestock use, sodbusting of native range, along with associated detriments such as noxious weed encroachment and increased wildlife disturbance and removal. This threat level is evident both locally and on a statewide basis. FWP has determined that intermountain grasslands and riparian habitats have and continue to receive the brunt of residential subdivision development across the state. Bird Creek Ranch has the potential to become another "Missouri River subdivision" linking the city of Great Falls to the Cascade community and beyond. Subdivisions and human encroachment are becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the Missouri River area, and will undoubtedly continue into the future. Residential, commercial and/or recreational development could result in direct replacement of native plants, prime soils and wetlands with roads, houses, outbuildings, lawns, or excessive numbers of domestic animals. The indirect effects of introducing a daily human presence and traffic on Bird Creek Ranch property could extend onto neighboring properties. Substantial increases in daily human activity levels would be expected to disturb and displace wildlife across an extended radius that could potentially include neighboring lands. Free-roaming domestic dogs and cats often extend the point source of human disturbance across property lines, and can cause high nest losses in ground nesting birds. Livestock use, including adequate considerations for ground nesting game and non-game birds, is compatible with agricultural production but is not always firmly established in farm and ranch operations. This easement would intend that the fundamental elements of wildlife habitat be protected into perpetuity, regardless of possible changes in property ownership.

V. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is for FWP to purchase, hold and monitor a conservation easement on the Bird Creek Ranch. This easement would include 2,292 acres of the ranch, which is entirely deeded Bird Creek Ranch property. An additional 40 acre parcel owned by the BLM lies within the Bird Creek Ranch deeded property boundary but would not be affected by the terms of this easement unless the BLM were to propose disposal of this property to the surrounding landowner. If this were to occur, the terms of this easement would require the landowner to grant FWP a conservation easement with the same terms as this easement.

The NRCS Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) currently holds an easement on 283 acres of the property (Exhibit B of Draft Management Plan). The WRP easement project involves rebuilding the breached dike of Jones Slough and installing a water control structure that was destroyed via a flooding event. In the past, the dike head gate was opened to allow seasonal high water from the Missouri River into Jones Slough. The head gate was then closed to prevent draining of the slough as the river receded. Water would remain in the slough into the fall, and sometimes year-round, which greatly increased the duration in which the slough provided valuable habitat for

waterfowl and other water dependent wildlife. The slough also sub-irrigated surrounding landscapes, pastures and croplands. The upland areas enrolled in WRP will be enhanced via re-seeding to native grasses and forbs. The NRCS will manage this portion of the easement in coordination with FWP and the landowners according to the WRP easement Management Plan. Activities that may pose a risk or change in the habitat within the WRP easement will be considered for authorization by the NRCS through the compatible use permitting process. This includes activities such as haying, grazing, habitat modifications, and other activities that given the intensity and duration may have negative impacts to the integrity of the habitat within the easement. In addition, the NRCS has agreed to cover any future costs associated with maintaining Jones Slough (per the WRP conservation easement terms).

The NRCS Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) has allocated approximately \$400,000 towards an easement on 1,250 acres of the ranch. The FRPP contribution protects 1,250 acres of prime agriculture lands by preventing the conversion of prime agriculture land to non-agricultural uses, such as subdivision, and maintains these working farmlands into perpetuity. FRPP will provide funding up to 50% of a conservation easement, but requires a non-Federal match, therefore FWP proposes to utilize the Habitat Montana Program to fund the remainder of the easement not covered by FRPP, WRP and PPL Montana. The FWP easement will also overlie the “FRPP Area”. However, the FWP easement will not, and legally does not modify the terms of the existing FRPP conservation easement. Likewise, the FWP Management Plan will not and does not modify the restoration and management plan for the “FRPP Area” compiled by NRCS. However, there may be opportunities for the NRCS and FWP to coordinate management of the “FRPP Area” and the remainder of the ranch, such that it meets the objectives of both the NRCS and FWP.

The FWP conservation easement would extend FWP’s interest beyond that obtained by the two NRCS easements by providing public access to the WRP and FRPP easement areas, along with the remainder of the property. FWP’s conservation easement would also restrict the landowner from outfitting or fee hunting on these two easement areas, along with the remainder of the ranch. Wording covering protection and management of the WRP and FRPP easement areas, including the remainder of the property will be included in the FWP / Bird Creek Ranch Management Plan and FWP / Bird Creek Easement document.

To perpetually define and ensure sound grazing practices across time and landowners, this FWP easement requires a rotational and/or rest-rotation grazing system on approximately 1,100 acres receiving growing season use (plus an additional 360 acres of adjoining state lands under grazing lease). For pasture numbers and delineations and seasons of use, see the attached grazing plan schematics in the draft FWP / Bird Creek Management Plan (Exhibits A & B). This rotational grazing system will be monitored on an annual basis for compliance and will be reviewed every 5 years for functionality.

The proposed FWP conservation easement would also enhance the benefits to the public by guaranteeing access for public hunting and wildlife viewing. The easement terms specify that the Bird Creek Ranch will provide reasonable public access for hunting and wildlife viewing at appropriate times of the year, via a method mutually agreed upon in the draft FWP / Bird Creek

Management Plan. Whereas the easement language is intended to endure into perpetuity, the Management Plan may be amended at any time by mutual consent between the Landowner and FWP, to address changing conditions and emerging issues. Bird Creek Ranch proposes to allow foot travel upon the easement area during daylight hours for wildlife viewing throughout the year, with landowner permission, except during periods when livestock are present in pastures. Bird Creek Ranch has agreed to allow a minimum of 400 hunter days annually on the ranch. Hunting will be allowed each Friday through Monday period of the upland game bird, waterfowl and big game hunting seasons (August 15 – January 15). Bird Creek Ranch hunting rules are defined in the Management Plan that may be altered upon mutual agreement between FWP and the Landowner. Annual hunter use will be documented by the Landowner and FWP. The Landowner may deny access to, or expel from the Land, any person for cause, including (but not exclusively) the following: intoxication or use of illegal substances; reckless behavior that jeopardizes human life, wildlife habitat, or Landowner's property, or is in violation of law or regulation applicable to public use of the Land; or misconduct under or violation of the terms of public access provided in this Easement, including any plan of access adopted and implemented under this Easement.

Specific terms of the easement are contained in a separate legal document, which is the "Deed of Conservation Easement". This document lists FWP and Landowner rights under terms of the easement as well as restrictions on landowner activities. The rights of both parties and restrictions on Landowner activities were negotiated with and agreed upon by FWP, NRCS and the Landowner.

To summarize terms of this easement, FWP's rights include the right to: (1) identify, preserve and enhance specific habitats; (2) monitor and enforce restrictions; (3) prevent activities inconsistent with purpose of the easement; (4) provide public access for hunting and wildlife viewing.

Landowner's retained rights include the right to: (1) continue to reside on the ranch in one of the existing residences and build up to one new residence within the 10 acre defined building area (located in the SE¼ of Section 20, Township 18 North, Range 1 East, Cascade County) and the right to renovate or replace the two existing residences; (2) continue the livestock operation within the described rotational grazing system; (3) continue to cultivate and farm existing haylands and cultivated fields; (4) continue to regulate public use of the Land at all times; (5) develop and maintain water resources, including springs, on the Land necessary for farming, grazing, wildlife and domestic purposes that are allowed by this easement, and to develop and market spring water from 2 springs; (6) repair, renovate or improve existing buildings, corrals, roads and irrigation structures; (7) construct, remove, repair or replace fences while maintaining the rotational grazing system; (8) explore, develop and extract oil, gas and other hydrocarbons following the Rocky Mountain Front Oil and Gas Guidelines upon a plan of operation approved by FWP; (9) replace or construct a barn in the designated building area; (10) construct facilities for the development and utilization of energy resources such as wind, solar, hydroelectric, methane and alcohol; (11) use agrichemicals for the control of noxious weeds; (12) rent dwellings for a bed and breakfast operation; (13) install utility structures as long as those rights are not inconsistent with the purposes of the Conservation Easement and will not significantly

impact the conservation values of the Land. The significance of an impact will be evaluated by the severity, duration, geographic extent and frequency of the occurrence of the potential impact.

Restrictions placed upon Landowner activities include: (1) no removal, control or manipulation by any means of shrub species browsed by wildlife (including but not limited to: aspen, rose, hawthorne, snowberry, chokecherry, skunkbrush, willow and cottonwood) except in routine clearing of roads, trails, structures and fencelines; (2) no subdivision less than 640 acre parcels and then only for agricultural purposes and subject to the continuing terms of the easement; (3) no new cultivation or farming of the native rangelands and agricultural activities must be carried out in a manner conducive to plant, soil and water quality maintenance (adherence to a described grazing plan which does not include an AUM cap) and to the NRCS Conservation Plan (4) no outfitting or fee hunting; (5) no surface mining except that gravel and rock may be extracted for use on the property; (6) no commercial feed lots; (7) no game farms; (8) no refuse dumping.

VI. DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

Alternative A—No Action

FWP considered the alternative of taking no action. Under the "No Action Alternative" Bird Creek Ranch would continue to be managed as in the past but there would be no guarantee of the preservation of agricultural values, wildlife habitat, open space, historic sites, recreational values and other resources as they are found on the ranch. Specifically, without the proposed easement, these resources are vulnerable to future residential subdivision, sodbusting, improper livestock grazing, commercial feedlots and surface mining. These activities would likely result in decreased habitat quantity, habitat quality and wildlife use. The magnitude of these and other potential impacts to this and adjacent physical and human environments are difficult to measure due to the uncertainty of future events. There is no guaranteed public access to the ranch without this easement. If FWP were not considered as a management partner, NRCS and PPL Montana would have to find another entity to fund approximately \$350,000 required to complete the purchase the conservation easement. Such funding was researched in the past without success. Thus, without FWP's involvement it is highly unlikely that a conservation easement would be purchased on the ranch.

Alternatives Considered but Dropped from Further Consideration

The Landowner initiated the conservation easement process with FWP and at no point expressed interest in fee title sale or a long-term lease, therefore the alternative of purchasing Bird Creek Ranch fee title or having a long-term lease is not an option. Since conservation easements are also FWP's preferred option, the only other reasonable alternative considered in this EA is the "No Action Alternative" as described above.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Through prevention of certain identified activities, this conservation easement will legally maintain or improve existing habitats into perpetuity. Impacts associated with this proposed

action shall be determined only as they apply to current resource ownership, uses and conditions. Under the no action alternative, resource ownership, uses and conditions may or may not change. Consequently, impacts associated with the No action alternative are unknown.

1. Land Resources

Impact of proposed action: No negative impact would occur as a result of this proposal. The terms of the proposed easement are structured to prevent adverse impacts to soils and vegetation. Subdivision and development of the Land is restricted under easement terms, as is cultivation of native plant communities (sod-busting). The proposed easement will ensure that land resources are maintained and/or enhanced into perpetuity.

No Action alternative: This alternative would allow for potential disturbance of soils and vegetation from intense agricultural practices and possible residential development.

2. Air Resources

Impact of proposed action: The proposed action would likely result in a net reduction in potential future risks to air and water quality on the subject Land, compared to no action. Possibilities for residential, commercial, and industrial developments would be restricted across the subject Land through this easement.

No action alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, if the Land were to be subdivided, increased human activity could potentially degrade the current air quality.

3. Water Resources

Impact of proposed action: There would be no impact into perpetuity over what is currently associated with a working livestock and farming operation. Current agricultural practices on the property have proven to be generally compatible with maintenance of water quality.

No action alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, there would be no assurances that over time that the property wouldn't change from primarily an agricultural operation to another use, with no conservation protection of water resources.

4. Vegetation Resources

Impact of proposed action: This action would result in a positive impact. The terms of the easement protect the quantity, quality and character of the native plant communities found on the property. The prescribed rotational grazing system (see Draft Management Plan) will allow and foster native vegetation establishment, recovery and maintenance on all sites within the grazing system. The WRP easement will also maintain and/or enhance wetland habitats into perpetuity.

No action alternative: There would be no immediate impact. If the Land's primary use were to change from agriculture to subdivision or some other use there would be no conservation

measures in place to maintain productivity of the Land. In addition, there would be no long-term protection of existing native plant communities. Livestock grazing, sodbusting and potential subdivision would be unrestricted across all subject lands under this alternative.

5. Fish/Wildlife Resources

Threatened and Endangered Species

Impact of the Proposed Action: The bald eagle is Federally classified as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). One active bald eagle nest occurs on the Bird Creek Ranch property located in the riparian cottonwood stands along the Missouri River. The property also contains important feeding areas for bald eagles, having the Missouri River as a property boundary and Jones slough within the project boundary. Therefore, this easement would be expected to have beneficial effects on bald eagles into perpetuity.

No-action alternative: This alternative would allow for potential disturbance of soils and vegetation from intense agricultural practices and possible residential development, thus potentially destroying/altering habitats available for bald eagles.

Wildlife (General)

Impact of the proposed action: The proposed action would protect into perpetuity an important and strategically located habitat complex for waterfowl, shorebirds, game and non-game upland birds, small mammals, raptors and big game species.

No-action alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, this alternative would preserve the possibility of future habitat loss and the adverse impacts to wildlife populations described in the *Project Need* segment of this document.

6. Adjacent Land

Impact of proposed action: No negative impact is expected. The property will be maintained as has historically occurred. Continued public hunting access may relieve some hunting pressure on adjacent landowners. The Landowner also holds a grazing lease on approximately 360 acres of adjoining state school trust lands. The rotational grazing plan will directly benefit this property as it is incorporated into the grazing system. Dedicated yearlong rest periods within the system will directly benefit the quality and quantity of vegetation on these lands (see draft Management Plan).

No action alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, this alternative would preserve the possibility of future subdivision and habitat loss potentially causing impacts to neighboring lands as wildlife populations are displaced.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Through prevention of certain identified activities, this conservation easement would legally maintain and/or improve existing habitats into perpetuity. Impacts associated with this proposed action shall be determined only as they apply to current resource ownership, uses and conditions. Under the No action alternative, resource ownership, uses and conditions may or may not change. Consequently, impacts associated with the No action alternative are unknown.

1. Noise/Electrical Effects

Impact of proposed action: No impact would occur over existing conditions. Preservation of open space into perpetuity will ensure noise and electrical effects remain as in existing conditions of the ranch.

No action alternative: Noise and electrical impacts could negatively impact the area through potential future housing and road developments. Utilities would be required to develop the area, negatively impacting the project area and neighboring lands compared to the proposed action alternative.

2. Land Use

Impact of proposed action: The Land would continue to operate as a working farm and ranch. There would be no impact on the productivity or profitability of the ranch, nor be conflicts with existing land uses in the area. The maintenance of a rotational grazing program influences the method of use but does not impact the type of land use.

No action alternative: No immediate impact would occur. However, with potential future changes in land ownership and land use, habitat quality, wildlife use and recreational opportunities could be diminished.

3. Risk/Health Hazards

Impact of proposed action: No impact would occur.

No action alternative: No impact would occur.

4. Neighboring Landowners and Local Community Impacts

Impact of the Proposed Action: The proposed action would generally maintain existing conditions in the local community. There would be no anticipated negative impacts to the community. The scenic values and open character of this property would be maintained and enjoyed by the community into perpetuity. Refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

No action alternative: Future residential development if unchecked would change the nature of the existing community to a varying degree. This alternative would allow the possibility for substantial changes in future land uses of Bird Creek Ranch, which may affect neighboring

property values to varying degrees. Neighboring ranchers might be concerned about a change in ownership and possible changes in land use under the No action alternative, as these could affect the amount of effort and expense a rancher must devote to maintaining fences and protecting his or her adjacent property.

5. Public Services/Taxes/Utilities

Impact of proposed action: There would be no effect on local or state tax bases or revenues, no alterations of existing utility systems nor tax bases of revenues, nor increased uses of energy sources. As agricultural property, the Land would continue to be taxed as it has before. Refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

No action alternative: With possible residential subdivision, police and fire protection, road improvements, utilities and services would be demanded.

Economies

Impact of the Proposed Action: The proposed action would restrict future residential and commercial developments on the subject Land, which would allow wildlife to continue to flourish. The scenic view-shed would be preserved by the proposed action, which may translate into a minor, long-term economic benefit to land values of surrounding properties.

No Action Alternative: Over the long run, the No action alternative would allow greater potential for residential and commercial growth in the local community. Therefore, future development under this alternative on the subject Land and possibly neighboring lands would be accompanied by relatively high costs for roads, utilities and other services which would be required partially or wholly by state and local governments.

6. Aesthetics/Recreation

Impact of proposed action: There would be a positive impact. The easement would maintain in perpetuity the quality and quantity of recreational opportunities and scenic vistas, and would not affect the character of the neighborhood. The proposed action would increase public access for hunting and wildlife viewing on the property.

No action alternative: Eventual subdivision and development would reduce the aesthetic and recreational opportunities on the project area. If residential development occurs on the property in the future, which would be possible under the No action alternative, hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities would almost certainly be removed.

7. Cultural/Historic Resources

Impact of proposed action: There would be a positive impact. The existing historic sites on the ranch would be conserved through terms of the conservation easement.

No action alternative: Potential residential and/or commercial developments allowable under this alternative would leave cultural and historical resources at risk.

8. Cumulative Impacts

Impact of the proposed action: The proposed action would not be expected to contribute to a cumulative impact in a measurable way.

No Action Alternative: The No action alternative could ultimately contribute to the cumulative regional and local losses of wildlife habitat in general, and natural wetland and riparian complexes in particular, if the subject Land is managed in a manner incompatible with wildlife requirements. No action could ultimately contribute slightly to the cumulative regional and local loss of grazing land for the livestock industry.

9. Socio-Economic Assessment

Refer to the attached Draft Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

IX. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE

The proposed action has no significant effects on current conditions. It cannot be definitively determined what, if any, effects may result from the No action alternative.

X. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the above assessment, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and an Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of review.

XI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Formal public participation specific to FWP's proposed purchase of this conservation easement will begin with the availability of this draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for public review for a one month comment period. The availability of this EA for public review will be advertised in the Great Falls and Cascade areas, and through statewide media via FWP's website at www.fwp.mt.gov. A copy of the draft EA will be mailed to all parties who indicate an interest in this proposal. The public review and comment period will be January 15 through February 16, 2007. A public hearing will be held at the Cascade Town Hall (13 Front St. North) Monday, February 5th at 7:00 P.M. After reviewing public input received on or before February 16, FWP will decide upon a preferred alternative. The Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission and State Board of Land Commissioners will be asked to render final decisions on this proposal at their regularly scheduled meetings in March 2007.

Comments should be addressed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
Attn: Bird Creek Ranch Conservation Easement Proposal

Or

cloecker@mt.gov

Attn: Bird Creek Ranch Conservation Easement Proposal

Comments must be postmarked no later than February 16, 2007 to ensure consideration in the decision-making process.

XII. NAME OF PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PREPARING EA

Cory Loecker
Wildlife Biologist
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

**Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Division
Draft Management Plan**

BIRD CREEK RANCH / FWP CONSERVATION EASEMENT

I. Introduction

The purpose of the FWP / Bird Creek Ranch conservation easement is to preserve and protect the conservation values of the Land, particularly the habitat the Land provides for its wildlife species, and its agricultural and historic resources into perpetuity. The 2,292 acre Bird Creek Ranch possesses riparian, emergent and forested wetlands, shrub and native grassland communities important to many wildlife species, including deer, antelope, upland game birds, waterfowl and numerous non-game wildlife species. Three miles of Missouri River frontage is utilized as Bird Creek Ranch's north and west property boundaries. Four miles of Bird Creek are also encompassed by the property. The property borders 920 acres of school trust lands (DNRC), which contain the mouth and lowest reach of Bird Creek as it enters the Missouri River. The property is managed as a working ranch for cattle, sheep and hay ground, while maintaining and/or enhancing wildlife habitats throughout. Primary game species inhabiting the ranch include white-tailed deer, mule deer, antelope, ring-necked pheasant, Hungarian partridge, sharp-tailed grouse and numerous species of waterfowl. Non-game wildlife species are also abundant throughout.

Bird Creek Ranch is already encumbered by a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) conservation easement on a 283 acre wetland/slough (Jones Slough) portion of the ranch, labeled as “WRP Area” in Exhibit B. This FWP easement will overlie the WRP easement, in that it will further restrict the landowner's rights in the “WRP Area”. However, the Bird Creek Ranch / FWP easement will not, and legally does not modify the terms of the existing WRP conservation easement. Likewise, this management plan will not, and does not, modify the restoration and management plan that NRCS has prepared for the “WRP Area”. However, there may be opportunities for NRCS and FWP to coordinate management of the “WRP Area”, such that it meets the objectives of NRCS, FWP and Bird Creek Ranch.

Note: The lands in the “WRP Area” are not considered part of this grazing management plan. Any habitat manipulations in the WRP Area will be evaluated and authorized by the USDA/NRCS WRP Wetland Restoration Easement warranty deed and WRP program policy.

This FWP easement is being established, managed and funded in conjunction with a variety of partners. Partners include: approximately \$400,000 from the NRCS Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), which requires a 50% non-Federal match and \$50,000 from PPL Montana, LLC. FWP proposes to use \$350,000 - \$450,000 (pending appraisal) from the FWP Habitat Montana Program to fund the remainder of the easement. In addition, the FWP Montana Migratory Bird Stamp Program has earmarked \$50,000 for potential future wetland and riparian renovation/restoration projects on the ranch.

II. Goals, Objectives, Concerns and Strategies

Goal 1: *By implementation of FWP easement terms, the quality and amounts of native habitats, important agricultural habitats and wildlife potential currently found on the Bird Creek Ranch property shall be maintained without displacing private land use. Under the same Easement terms, a secondary goal is to provide guaranteed public hunting access and opportunity. This shall be accomplished with minimal impact to this and adjacent physical and human environments. A third goal is to apply a rotational grazing system on the ranch to maintain and/or enhance existing vegetative communities. This shall be accomplished by implementation of a grazing management plan.*

Objective 1: Manage native grassland, shrubland, wetland vegetation, riparian vegetation and agricultural habitats to maintain and improve these plant communities for the benefit of livestock and wildlife alike.

While this property is certainly capable of sustaining livestock use under sound management practices, unregulated or excessive grazing has the potential to reduce habitat quality for both wildlife and agricultural practices. Reduced habitat quality often results in wildlife number reductions and/or displacement. The NRCS FRPP program has offered approximately \$400,000 towards a conservation easement on 1,250 acres of NRCS determined prime agriculture soils within the project area. The program prevents the conversion of prime agriculture land to non-agricultural uses, such as subdivision, and maintains these working farmlands into perpetuity, but requires a 50% non-Federal match. The FWP easement will also overlie the "FRPP Area", further restricting the Landowner's rights in this area. However, FWP easement will not, and legally does not modify the terms of the existing FRPP conservation easement. Likewise, this management plan will not and does not modify the restoration and management that NRCS will prepare for the "FRPP Area". However, there may be opportunities for the NRCS, FWP and the Landowner to coordinate management of the "FRPP Area", such that it meets the needs and objectives of all interested parties.

To perpetually define and ensure sound grazing practices across time and Landowners, this FWP easement requires a rotational grazing system on approximately 1,100 acres receiving growing season use (plus an additional 360 acres of adjoining DNRC lands under Bird Creek grazing lease). For pasture numbers and delineations and seasons of use, see attached grazing plan schematics (Exhibits A and B). This rotational grazing system will be monitored annually for compliance and will be reviewed every 5 years for functionality.

Grazing plan adherence will be monitored by FWP, or its contractor, to assess effectiveness and Landowner compliance. Livestock use and distribution will be assessed annually. FWP, in conjunction with the Landowners, may recommend fence and water improvements, if deemed necessary. A water source will be developed via the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program providing a pipeline and storage tank to implement the grazing plan for Hill pastures 1, 2 and 3. The NRCS EQIP program will also provide funding for approximately 8,000' of fencing to incorporate a "three pasture" grazing system on Hill pastures 1, 2 and 3 (Exhibit B). An additional tank, also funded by EQIP, will be located in the upland area of the "Impound" pasture (Exhibit B) to alleviate grazing pressure on the riparian areas of that particular pasture. Rock/gravel will be placed approximately 20-30' around both tanks at an approximate cost of \$5,000 funded by FWP. Placing rock or gravel around tanks is necessary to alleviate damage incurred by cattle utilizing tanks in sandy soils. An additional 1-mile (5,280') of fencing will be required in the "Impound" to implement the grazing system in this pasture at a cost of approximately \$10,000 to be funded by FWP. Compliance with pasture open and close dates will be monitored by FWP or its contractor. Photo points will be established in appropriate areas to examine long and short-term vegetation condition and changes.

Many shrub and tree species are important to wildlife. The removal, control or manipulation of shrub species important to wildlife by any means is prohibited within the terms of the FWP easement document, including but not limited to burning, plowing, chemical treatment or removal of such tree and shrub species. These species include without limitation: aspen, rose, hawthorn, snowberry, chokecherry, skunkbush sumac, willow and cottonwood. These prohibitions do not apply to the routine clearing or control of brush in connection with the construction and maintenance of trails, roads, fences and structures permitted under this FWP Easement.

Farming activity will be permitted on existing or historic farm/cultivated ground only (Exhibit B). Additional sod busting or tilling of previously undisturbed vegetation is not permitted under this FWP

Easement. If the Landowner desires, FWP may provide technical assistance for seeding farm ground with a vegetative mix that is beneficial to wildlife. This may be, but is not limited to, participation in a Federal habitat program, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or a State habitat program, such as a FWP Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Project (UGBHEP). The “Island- WRP Buffer” field and “Gooseneck- WRP Buffer” field (Exhibit B), with FWP approval, will be renovated over time by the Landowner. The Landowner may choose to apply for funding assistance through programs such as the NRCS- WHIP Program (Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program) or the FWP-UGBHEP (Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program). If the Landowner desires, FWP may provide technical assistance in choosing vegetative mixes that may be beneficial for both wildlife and agricultural uses. After renovation is completed, the areas will be rested all year for three consecutive years to allow grass communities to become established. The pastures will then be included in the grazing management plan (Exhibits A and B).

The NRCS Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) will restore a breached dike and install a water control structure on Jones Slough within the conservation easement boundary. The project involves rebuilding the breached dike and installing a water control structure that were destroyed via flooding event. In the past, the dike head gate was opened to allow runoff and seasonal high water from the Missouri River into Jones Slough. The head gate was then closed to prevent draining of the slough as the river receded. Water would remain in the slough into the fall, and sometimes year-round, which greatly increased the duration in which the slough provided valuable habitat for waterfowl and other water dependent wildlife. The slough also sub-irrigated surrounding landscapes, pastures and croplands. The upland areas enrolled in WRP will be seeded to native endemic grass and forb mixtures. NRCS will manage this portion of the ranch in coordination with FWP and the Landowner (see NRCS WRP Management Plan). Activities that may pose a risk or change in the habitat within the WRP easement will be considered for authorization by the NRCS through the compatible use permitting process. This includes activities such as haying, grazing, habitat modifications, and other activities that given the intensity and duration may have negative impacts to the integrity of the habitat within the easement. In addition, the NRCS has agreed to cover any future maintenance costs associated with the slough in the WRP Area per the WRP conservation easement terms.

The FWP / Bird Creek Ranch easement will overlie the NRCS FRPP and WRP easements, in that, it further restricts the Landowners rights in these two areas. As per FWP easement terms, the Landowner may not charge fees or outfit these areas, nor the remainder of the ranch, and has agreed to allow public access for hunting and wildlife viewing. Public access is outlined in Objective 3 of the Management Plan.

After restoration is completed in the “WRP Area” by NRCS, the “Island- WRP Buffer” and “Gooseneck- WRP Buffer” fields (Exhibit B) will be managed in coordination with the NRCS WRP Management Plan and the FWP conservation easement terms. Vegetation in these two fields will be managed to minimize impacts on nesting and breeding wetland dependent species of wildlife. If grazing/haying is allowed on the WRP Areas under the WRP compatible use process, it will only be allowed after July 15th for nesting protection of these wetland dependent species.

The existing CRP field (Exhibit B) enrollment expires in 2008. The landowner may choose to re-enroll the field in the CRP program. If so, the field will remain under CRP use restrictions during the contract period. If the landowner chooses not to re-enroll in the CRP program, the field will be included in the grazing system outlined in the Management Plan for the 2009 grazing year (as described in Exhibit A).

After new fencing and water development is completed to implement the grazing system, land maintenance, including but not limited to fence and water development construction and repair, noxious weed control and necessary road construction and repair, shall be the responsibility of the landowner.

Objective 2: Maintain wildlife use of the property.

As per conservation easement terms, the Landowner has the right to “construct, remove, maintain, repair, or replace fences, corrals, and other livestock handling structures” provided the structures do not significantly impact wildlife habitat or wildlife migration on and through the Land.

Current big game population estimates on Bird Creek Ranch include approximately 200 white-tailed deer, 50 mule deer and 25-75 antelope, depending on time of year. On Bird Creek Ranch and adjacent properties, game damage problems will be managed through hunting whenever possible during general hunting season frameworks. Game damage materials will be provided on an as needed basis to the ranch and adjacent landowners who allow reasonable free public hunting.

In order to document existing wildlife habitat, vegetative communities and distribution will be photographed and mapped for the FWP “Easement Baseline Inventory Report”. This is necessary so that vegetation changes can be monitored over time.

There may be habitat enhancement opportunities for upland game birds, which are not addressed in the FWP easement. FWP will review the ranch’s potential for habitat enhancements and possibly pursue projects, which may be of interest to the Landowner.

Objective 3: Provide guaranteed public hunting access and opportunity.

To provide a mechanism for the general public to place a reservation to hunt Bird Creek Ranch, FWP shall offer the Landowner, but not limit him/her to apply for FWP’s Block Management Program. If the Landowner would like to apply for the Block Management Program, he/she would have to submit an application to FWP. The block management coordinator, area biologist and warden annually rank new applicants by factors such as: available funding, habitat components, public access and hunter opportunities. Other options may include a telephone reservation system, sign-in box, and map/sign production. Should the Landowner decide not to participate in Block Management, the Landowner must develop an equally effective system for handling hunter requests within the FWP easement terms.

At this time the Landowner has chosen to allow walk-in access originating from two identified parking areas (see Bird Creek hunting map - Exhibit D). Two parking areas, one located on the north end and one on the south end of the property will both be accessible via the county road. Funding for development of these two parking areas (approximately \$5,000) will be the responsibility of FWP. At this time, the Bird Creek Ranch proposes to allow foot travel upon the easement area during daylight hours for wildlife viewing throughout the year, with landowner permission, except during periods when livestock are present in pastures. Bird Creek Ranch has agreed to allow a minimum of 400 hunter days annually on the ranch. Hunting will be allowed each Friday through Monday period of the upland game bird, waterfowl and big game hunting seasons (August 15 – January 15). Bird Creek Ranch hunting rules are defined in the Management Plan that may be altered upon mutual agreement between FWP and the landowner. Annual hunter use will be documented by the Landowner and FWP. The Landowner may deny access to, or expel from the Land, any person for cause, including (but not exclusively) the following: intoxication or use of illegal substances; reckless behavior that jeopardizes human life, wildlife habitat, or Landowner’s property, or is in violation of law or regulation applicable to public use of the Land; or misconduct under or violation of the terms of public access provided in this Easement, including any plan of access adopted and implemented under this Easement.

III. Overall FWP / Bird Creek Ranch Conservation Easement Compliance

Annual monitoring will be conducted to determine compliance with the FWP easement terms on the entire property. This assessment shall be conducted by FWP, and/or FWP’s contractor with the Landowner, to assess Management Plan effectiveness and to review Landowner compliance with

easement terms. FWP, or FWP's contractor, will annually visit the property to monitor compliance with easement terms and Management Plan. The Landowner is encouraged to thoroughly familiarize themselves with easement terms, Management Plan and grazing system and refer to the Deed of Conservation Easement and Management Plan documents or contact FWP with any questions or concerns in order to avoid non-compliance.

Management Plan Attachments

*Grazing System Formula (Exhibit A)

*Grazing System Formula Map (Exhibit B)

*Bird Creek Ranch Hunting Rules (Exhibit C)

*Bird Creek Hunting Access Map (Exhibit D)

Exhibit A. Bird Creek Ranch Grazing Formula (2,650 acres)*

REMARKS	2007	2008	2009**
Native Pasture Rotation			
Hill Pasture 1 (240 acres)	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)	Rest all year
Hill Pasture 2 (256 acres)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)	Rest all year	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)
Hill Pasture 3 (252 acres)	Rest all year	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)
Impound Pasture (120 acres)	Rest all year	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)
South Pasture 1 (120 acres)	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)	Rest all year
South Pasture 2 (130 acres)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)	Rest all year	Graze growing season (5/15-8/1)
Island- WRP Buffer (70 acres)	Renovation	Renovation	Rest all year
Island- WRP Buffer 2010 (70 acres)	2010- Rest all year	2011- Graze/Hay after seed ripe (7/15-10/1)	2012- Rest all year
Gooseneck- WRP Buffer (70 acres)	Renovation	Renovation	Rest all year
Gooseneck- WRP Buffer 2010 (70 acres)	2010- Rest all year	2011- Rest all year	2012- Graze/Hay after seed ripe (7/15-10/1)
Slough Field (40 acres)	Rest all year	Graze full season (5/15-8/1)	Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)
CRP field (144 acres) until 2008***	CRP (no graze/hay)	CRP (no graze/hay)	CRP (no graze/hay)
CRP field (144 acres) no re-enrollment	2009 Rest all year	2010 Graze full season (8/1-10/15)	2011 Graze after seed ripe (8/1-10/15)
CRP field (144 acres) if re-enrolled - 2009	CRP (no graze/hay)	CRP (no graze/hay)	CRP (no graze/hay)
<i>Total Acres: 1,442</i>			
Ag Land			
Pump Field (80 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Bobcat Field (70 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Level Field (70 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Round Field (70 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
<i>Total acres: 290</i>			
Homestead (20 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Utility Pastures 1-7 (80 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Pivot/Irrigated North Field (270 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
West Field --calving (140 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
Creek Field (40 acres)	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion	Use at landowners discretion
<i>Total acres: 550</i>			
Misc. Acres			
WRP Area (283 acres)	Rest all year / NRCS use exclusion	Rest all year / NRCS use exclusion	Rest all year / NRCS use exclusion

Riparian Buffer (60 acres)	Rest all year	Rest all year	Rest all year
Tree Lot (25 acres)	Rest all year	Rest all year	Rest all year
<i>Total acres: 368</i>			
* Refer to map for pasture locations			
** In year four (2010), the rotation is repeated.			
*** If CRP is re-seeded to native vegetation in 2008, enter into rotational grazing system in 2009.			

Exhibit B. Bird Creek Ranch Grazing Formula Map.

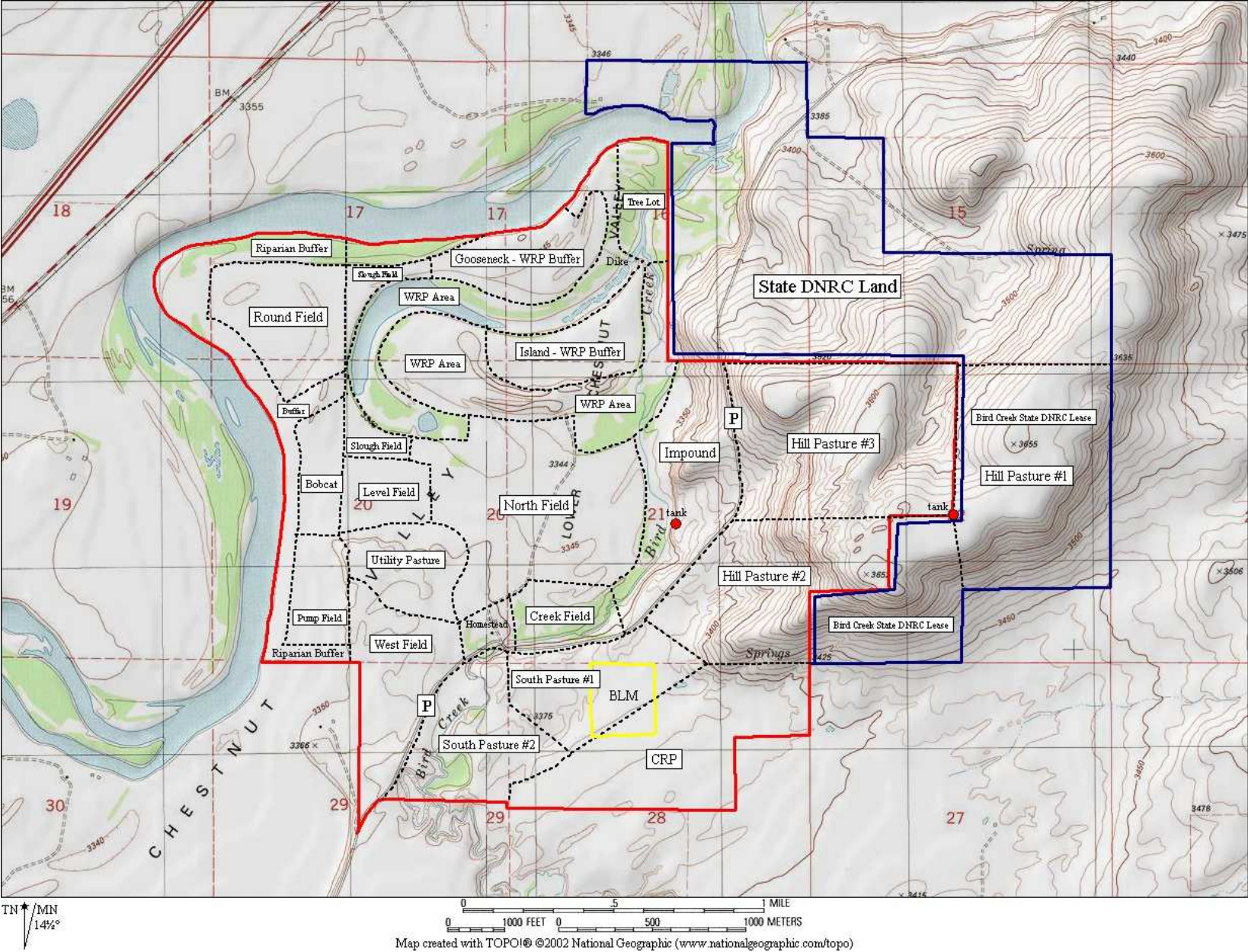
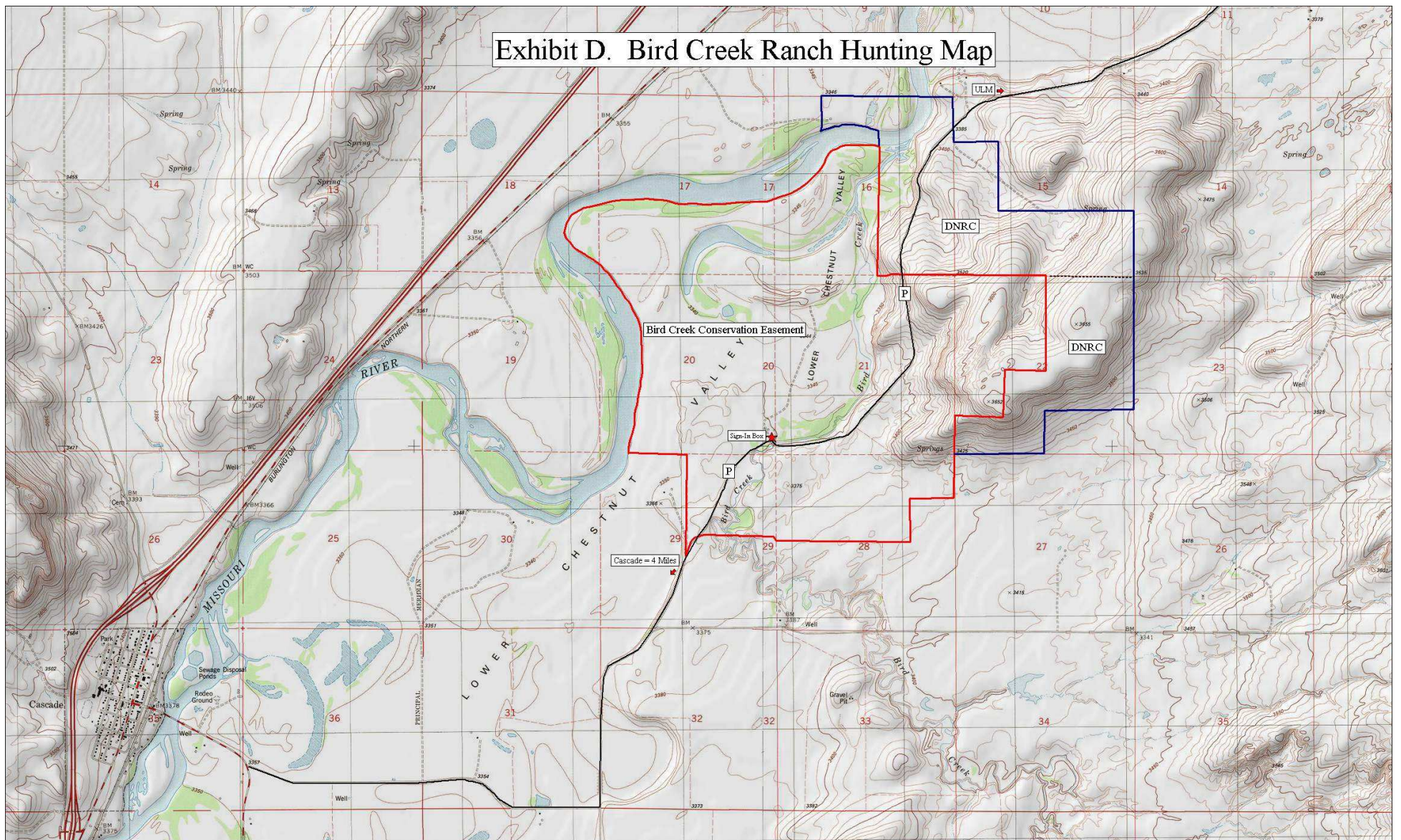


Exhibit C. Bird Creek Ranch Hunting Area Rules

- 1) The ranch is open to public hunting every Friday through Monday of the upland game bird, waterfowl and big game hunting seasons (August 15 – January 15).
- 2) A hunting reservation must be made with Matthew's Answering Service (406) --- - ---- on the Wednesday (beginning at 8:00 a.m.) **prior** to the Friday through Monday period that you are interested in hunting. All hunters must have an area map and rules in his/her possession at all times.
- 3) Hunting parties (a party is defined as **1 to 3** hunters) may reserve only **1** day per Friday through Monday hunt period. A total of 2 hunting parties will be allowed per day on each Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. To distribute hunter opportunity, individual hunters may hunt no more than **3** times per hunting season on the property.
- 4) All hunting is by park-and-walk only from county road parking areas (see map). Come prepared to retrieve harvested game (i.e. drag rope, game cart or backpack). No motorized vehicles are allowed on the ranch.
- 5) After a reservation is made with the answering service, hunters on the day of the hunt must fill out a permission slip at the sign-in box near the ranch headquarters mailbox (126 River Road) the morning of the hunt (see location on map). Please do not disturb the residences. At the end of the hunt, please drop off the stub portion of the permission slip, with the completed hunter survey, in the sign-in box.
- 6) No hunting in the immediate vicinity of any of ranch buildings or residences.
- 7) No camping or open fires are permitted on the ranch.
- 8) No hunting in areas where cattle/people are present.

Report any violations to 1-800-TIP-MONT

Exhibit D. Bird Creek Ranch Hunting Map



Map created with TOPO® ©2002 National Geographic (www.nationalgeographic.com/topo)

BIRD CREEK RANCH
CONSERVATION EASEMENT
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
December, 2006

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when land is acquired for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the purchase of a conservation easement on property currently owned by the Bird Creek Ranch. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed conservation easement.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The 2292 acre Bird Creek Ranch is located in Cascade County about 4 miles north of Cascade, Montana. The majority of the property, 1971 acres, is upland habitat with the remainder being wetlands. The environmental assessment has a detailed description of the habitat types by acreage.

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

As mentioned a large part of the easement acres are upland grasslands with wetlands along Bird Creek and the Missouri River. The Bird Creek property supports wintering whitetail deer, mule deer, antelope, upland game birds, waterfowl and a host of other species that call these habitats home.

C. Current Use

The Bird Creek property is a working ranch.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Purchase a conservation easement on the property by MFWP
- 2) No purchase

MFWP Purchase of Conservation Easement

The intent of the Bird Creek Ranch conservation easement is to protect and enhance the wildlife habitat currently found on the property while maintaining the agricultural character of the property. Please refer to the Deed of Conservation Easement for a thorough explanation of the terms for this easement between MFWP and landowners.

No Purchase Alternative

The second alternative, the no purchase option, does not guarantee the protection the native habitats nor protect this land from future subdivision development, changes in land uses, or secure access for the public into the future.

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if MFWP does not purchase a conservation easement.

The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been calculated.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The purchase of a conservation easement will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, keep the land in private ownership and provide for public access for hunting. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the conservation easement to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The conservation easement proposed on the Bird Creek Ranch will be funded by a number of partners including the U.S. Department of Agriculture - NRCS Program, FRPP Program, PPL Montana, Bird Creek Ranch, and MFWP. Total cost of the easement is approximately \$900,000 - \$1,000,000.

MFWP's financial obligation is approximately \$350,000 - \$450,000 (pending appraisal). These dollars are provided through the Habitat Montana Program, which is funded by sportsman's license dollars. Maintenance/management costs related to the easement are associated with monitoring the property to insure the easement terms are being followed.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the purchase of the conservation easement. The easement, considered separately, will not change the type or level of use on the property. Therefore, the purchase of a conservation easement on this land will have no impact on the current level of taxes paid to Cascade County.

B. Economic Impacts

The purchase of a conservation easement will not affect the agricultural activities on the Bird Creek Ranch. The number of cattle run on the property will not change however a rest rotation grazing system will be implemented under the terms of the conservation easement.

The easement will provide public access for hunting. The number of hunters and number of days are defined in the conservation easement agreement.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The conservation easement will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural integrity of the land, and ensure public hunting opportunities.

The purchase of a conservation easement by MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Cascade County.

The agricultural/ranching operations will continue at their current levels. The financial impacts of the easement on local businesses will be neutral to slightly positive in both the short and long run.